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2004

Book Review: "This Is America?" The Sixties in Lawrence, Kansas

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Miner, Craig, "Book Review: "This Is America?" The Sixties in Lawrence, Kansas" (2004). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 306.

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"This Is America?" The Sixties in Lawrence, Kansas. By Rusty L. Monhollon. New York: Palgrave, 2002. xvi + 284 pp. Photographs, notes, selected bibliography, index. \$55.00 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

This book is the second recent treatment of dissent in Kansas cities in the late twentieth century. Along with Gretchen Eick's *Dissent in Wichita* (2001), it shows that where active protest was concerned, Kansas in the 1960s and 1970s was no backwater. One could add the struggle over the Wolf Creek nuclear plant in the same era to complete the picture of a state evenly split on issues.

Monhollon is sympathetic to the activists in Lawrence, seeing developments there as the inevitable consequence of national trends played out in a way that should not have been unexpected in a college town. On the other hand, despite the "Bleeding Kansas" territorial tradition, Lawrence as a whole had become considerably more conservative since the 1850s. Consequently activism over everything from an integrated public swimming pool, to the demand for a black cheerleader and homecoming queen at the University of Kansas, to the protests over Viet Nam revealed a deep "town/gown" split and a suspicion on the part of townspeople that KU was soft on law and order and infiltrated by outside radicals.

Truly, some of the incidents and personalities were most frightening to a town that had become complacent. H. Leonard Harrison was not only an articulate and inflammatory black activist, but had a criminal record. When he was employed by KU to teach a class, some thought things had gotten out of hand. There were fire bombings—of the ROTC facilities and, most prominently, the student union in 1970. There were snipers. And there were true riots over police actions, such as the shooting of black activist Rick Dowdell by police. The Black Student Union published a paper so radical and sometimes so obscene that occasionally local printers refused to print it. Chancellor Lawrence Chalmers had to walk a fine line between the defense of free speech and academic freedom, even for Abbie Hoffman, and making Lawrence a tinderbox.

This book makes excellent use of newspapers, oral history, and university archives to tell a vivid story with implications far beyond local history. It does well in showing the variations among both radicals and conservatives and presenting all sides fairly. Lawrence was America, and the Great Plains was in no way insulated from the passions of the times.

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